

# THE EVOLUTION



OF CULTS

Every year, I look forward to Shen Yun season. I've never seen the classical dance troupe perform, but I can't resist online discourse about its supernatural ability to infiltrate every advertising medium imaginable. "Parents PLEASE check your child's candy at Halloween this year," one of my favourite memes reads. "My son just found an entire Shen Yun ad in his candy bar."

For the uninitiated: Shen Yun is a two-hour production that tours 150 cities around the world each year. What's less known is that the force behind its elaborate costumes and soaring music is Falun Gong, a Chinese spiritual movement that sprung up in the 1990s and sits at the center of some unhinged controversies.

On the tamer end, the Falun Gong-owned media network *The Epoch Times* has been accused of spreading conspiracy theories. It goes way deeper, though. Ex-Falun Gong members claim they've been targeted by the Chinese government for forced organ harvesting, and their leader Li Hongzhi maintains that he can both levitate and see the future.

Yet despite all of this, Shen Yun remains wildly popular. I can't help but wonder — is this a cult and who am I to judge? These days, the line between cult and community is often blurrier than we think.



Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi demonstrating a meditation technique.



An ultra-radical Christian movement called The Skoptsy emerges in the Russian Empire, practicing self-castration and mastectomy to rid themselves of lust and temptation.



Hong Xiuquan declares himself the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and leads the God Worshipping Society in a rebellion against China's Qing dynasty, leading to 20-30M deaths.

## Cults aren't what they used to be

The word "cult" comes from the Latin *cultus*, meaning care, cultivation and worship. Traditionally, it refers to small, often religious or spiritual groups led by a charismatic leader, and bound together by insular beliefs, coded language and strict hierarchies (usually with some degree of harm in the mix).

But these days, the definition has expanded far beyond academic and religious contexts, and we throw it around because it's punchy, familiar, and let's be honest — kind of fun. When we call something a "cult," we're usually pointing to its structure, including shared rituals, intense devotion and a magnetic figurehead at the centre.

Whatever the definition, cults have taken on a new shape in the 2020s. Now, you don't need to shave your head, drink the Kool-Aid or join a commune to belong; you just need WiFi. Criminologist Dr. Shtull argues that social media hasn't just made cults more accessible — it's made them virtually unavoidable.

It's not hard to see why cults are on the rise. Facebook and TikTok have shattered the barriers of traditional recruitment tactics, like physical isolation. Modern cult leaders can reach the disenfranchised at record speed through carefully crafted online personas, targeted advertising and algorithmic manipulation.

### Wait... is this a cult?

It's notoriously difficult to estimate how many actual cults exist. In her 2025 book *Cults Like Us*, Jane Borden estimates there are 10,000 active cult-like groups in the United States, and that number is only growing.

But maybe the better question isn't how many cults exist, but what actually makes something a cult? These days, almost everything seems up for debate.

Fervent celebrity fanbases like Taylor Swift's Swifties and Beyoncé's Beyhive? Check. Radicalized online subcultures demanding unwavering faith, like Flat Earthers and QAnon? Absolutely. And if we apply the definition loosely, we might start side-eyeing parts of our everyday lives, like our local WeWork, running clubs, or our slightly obsessive devotion to TikTok astrologers (guilty!).

Of course, not everything that inspires devotion is a cult. One of my favourite takes is from historian Tara Isabella Burton, who says: "like porn, you know a cult when you see it." She adds that the key difference between a cult and a religion isn't in a group's actual beliefs or practices, but in how society perceives them and the power dynamics that drive them.

In other words: if it's insular, powered by unchecked control, causing harm, and the vibe is off... it might just be a cult.



Panacea Society founder slash housewife Mabel Bartrop.

### Follow the leader

While there isn't one "cult personality," studies suggest certain things can make people more susceptible to recruitment, like emotional vulnerability, stressful life events and limited support. But while there isn't a single profile for cult followers, it's made up for in what we know concretely about cult leaders.

Psychology and criminal justice experts agree that they tend to have a grandiose sense of self, an insatiable need for admiration and a demand for absolute obedience. Many also exhibit manipulative and exploitative behaviour, whether financially, emotionally or sexually.



Manson family members on trial for the Tate murders.

### Body counts

History shows how easily charismatic leaders can twist devotion into destruction. Charles Manson didn't commit murder himself, but manipulated his followers into carrying out brutal killings in 1969, including stabbing pregnant actress Sharon Tate 16 times.

In 1978, Jim Jones led over 900 of his followers, including children, in a mass murder-suicide in Jonestown. Shoko Asahara orchestrated a deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, killing 13 and injuring thousands. At their core, these personalities aren't necessarily harmful — but give them devoted followers, a vertical power structure and a closed-off echo chamber, and suddenly their worst instincts have a stage.



Aum Shinrikyo leader Shoko Asahara with a follower.

### Everything, everywhere, all at once

The world is on fire. As we grapple with economic uncertainty, climate anxiety and declining trust in institutions in the aftermath of a global pandemic, many of us are feeling unhinged. More than just an escape, online spaces offer a promise of belonging, answers and a way forward, making them the perfect breeding ground for modern cults.

Taking cults seriously starts with letting go of the idea that they only recruit the weak or gullible. As we've seen, they prey on something far more universal: our need for connection, certainty and purpose. And that, my friend, is as human as it gets.

Words by Victoria Chan.



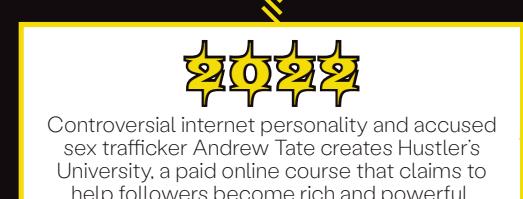
Helena Blavatsky founds the Theosophical Society. It introduced the idea of a charismatic leader to Western occult groups, and directly inspired Wicca + Scientology.



NXIVM founder and former Smallville Keith Raniere founder is convicted of sex trafficking and conspiracy to commit forced labour, after using his Hollywood fame to ensnare followers.



The Panacea Society collects 100,000+ petition signatures from British women to have a sealed box containing divine prophecies opened in the presence of 24 bishops.



Controversial internet personality and accused sex trafficker Andrew Tate creates Hustler's University, a paid online course that claims to help followers become rich and powerful.



39 Heaven's Gate followers commit mass suicide near San Diego, believing that they would join up with aliens on a UFO after death.



The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light starts gaining attention after videos of men in black beanies post videos on TikTok vowing to die for the founder.



Andrew and Tristan Tate are arrested for sex trafficking.